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OF EGYPTIAN THEBES.

—  
RIZE POEM,  
THE THEATRE, OXFORD,  
JUNE 7th, 1853.

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M DCCC LIII.

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*THE RUINS OF EGYPTIAN THEBES.*

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A PRIZE POEM,  
RECITED IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JUNE 7th, 1853.

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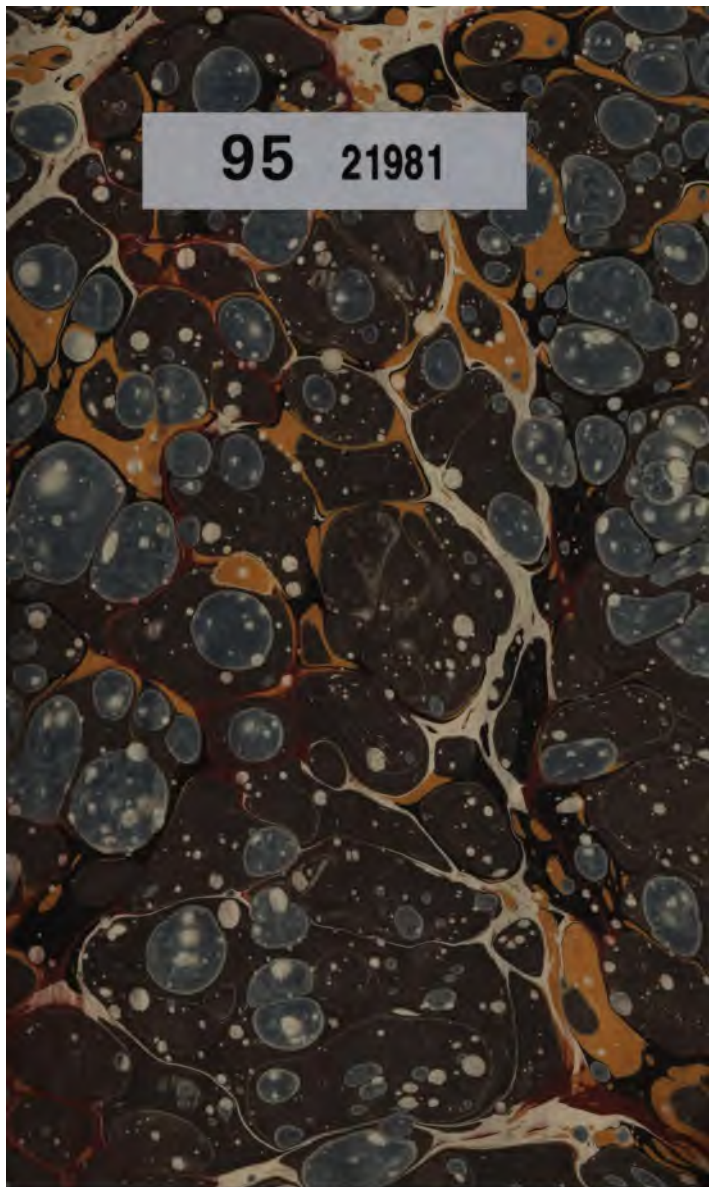


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I LAY in slumber, lightly bound, yet free  
 By fancy winged I strayed unfettered on  
 Through fairy splendours, touched again with life,  
 And orbiting into act and circumstance,  
 From the dim past ; awhile methought I stood  
 Among the halls of Carthage ; now among  
 The statued shrines of Athens, with the gods  
 Pallas, and young Apollo ; now at Rome  
 I saw a senate giving world-wide law  
 Or Scipio hurling back upon the foe  
 The storm of war at Zama ; 'till at length  
 Slowly my vision gathered time and shape,  
 And then upon a waste of Libyan plain  
 I wandered on alone, and not a sight,

Or sound I heard of any living thing,  
Save when the ostrich, borne across the sand  
On storm-swift pinion, lessened to a speck  
Far in the faint horizon ; or alone  
The dusky eagle winged his trackless way  
High overhead ; but when the night was late  
The distant echo of the lion's roar  
Fell on the ear like thunder, heard afar,  
What time the storm breaks crashing on the hills,  
And thickest hail, and streams of angry fire  
Reveal the terrors of the gloomy night.  
And now the sun sank slowly to repose  
In the still west, and 'neath his latest beam  
The flashing torrent of the dark-blue Nile  
Poured on its mass of waters, seaward borne ;  
Now o'er the headlong cataract with a roar  
Down plunging, lost in clouds of glittering spray,  
That lightly fell, like lilies scattered down  
From ivory fingers, or the silvery shower  
When the rude North's unkindly touch shakes off  
The glistening dew-drop from the rose's bloom ;  
Or parted here by barrier rocks, that frowned,  
Like giants set in the path to stop their way,

With thousand slender streamlets girdled in  
A thousand mossy isles ; here broadening down  
In full deep flood through tall acacia bowers,  
And happy orchards set with golden fruits  
Fair as the treasure, dragon-watched, that shone  
In the far gardens of th' Hesperides.  
But distant seen in solitary state  
Rose frowning towers, and battlements that fenced  
A mighty city ; and as near I came  
Precipitous walls, and clustered palaces,  
And temples old in story, bathed in light,  
Shone to the eye, like those rich jewelled domes  
That genii build in old Arabian tale  
Rich with the treasures of the land and sea.  
The gates lay broken down, I entered in  
Unheeded ; all was silence, save the cry  
Of some ill-omened bird, scared from his haunt  
By man's unwonted step ; and all the town  
Lay bound in slumber ; through the long blank street  
No face met mine, alone I wandered on.  
But all about me, towering to the sky,  
Rose lofty pinnacles, and ancient halls  
Of monarchs, all forgotten ; only these

Remained to tell their glory, only these  
To mock the wonder of a later age.  
And through tall windows rich with coloured stones  
The sunbeam poured upon the dazzled floors ;  
And flooded light o'er columns wreathed about  
With lotus, and high pointed obelisks traced  
With mystic letters, hard to tell, as leaves  
From sybil's scroll, or those dread lines of fire  
That wrought confusion in Belshazzar's hall,  
Writ by an unknown hand, foreshadowing woe.  
And every chamber, every palace hall  
Was dight with sculptured legendary lore ;  
Or brightly glowing by the painter's art  
Told stories of an early world, the youth  
Of nations that had passed away, and left,  
Save these, no other memory of their state.  
And here the sunbeam lighted into life  
An ancient tale of war ; a bannered host  
Poured forth from every gate, and all the plain  
Gleamed with bright brass, and tossed a thousand  
fires  
From helm and shield, and from ten thousand throats  
In wild fierce discord rose the yell of war :

And there the prancings of the warrior steed,  
The din of shielded legions, and the clang  
Of measured martial tread, each sound that wakes  
The daring latent in the soldier's breast :  
The eagle too, that knew the gathering strife  
The gaunt grim vulture hovered there, and troops  
Of hungry birds, that tear their sweetest meal  
What time the ranks are broken, and the fight  
Slopes onward, or the thick black cloud of smoke  
Wreathes up in volumes from the conquered town.  
Nor war alone, but every motley scene  
Of life was pictured there, in light and shade,  
Or glad, or mournful, like an April morn  
Half dulled with clouds, half laughing on the sun.  
And here a long procession filled the streets,  
A prince's wedding gay with royal robes  
And torches, moving lightly to the sound  
Of festal music ; here the crowded board  
Was thronged with guests that feasted till the eve,  
And sported till the morning star looked down  
On twilight slowly broadening into day.  
And other sights were there : the Libyan gods  
Stood, each in marble, figured to the life



By artist's fancy, such as life might be  
If life itself were frozen into stone.  
And there were Isis, Horus, and the rest,  
The dog Anubis, and the wolf-god, he  
Who slew Osiris, Typhon ; and the bull  
Apis, to whom a myriad voices rise  
And hail Osiris rendered back to life.  
Nor these alone, but men whose deeds of fame  
Speak to us from the past, sage, warrior, king,  
Poet, and statesman, names whose charm hath power  
To bind the ages with a closer chain  
Of brotherhood in great and glorious deeds.  
But I passed on, and left the glittering halls,  
And stood within the sepulchres of kings,  
More wondrous than their earthly palaces.  
For there they dwelt a little span of life  
Brief as a dream that fades away at morn,  
And passed and mingled with the silent dead :  
But here, while countless ages came and went,  
They lay in awful majesty, unchanged,  
Nor fearing change ; till the revolving years,  
Completed, circled out a newer life ;  
And former scenes, forgotten to the sense,

Were acted o'er again ; for so they deemed,  
 What was, had been, and was again to be  
 In due succession, different, yet the same.  
 And here within an inner chamber, dim,  
 Hung all with solemn draperies, where the sun  
 Had never pierced, and breezes never blew  
 The fragrant morning, sad as a sick man's room,  
 Whose friends stand hushed expecting ere he die,  
 A lonely woman sat ; a single lamp  
 Burned on before her, like a little star  
 Scarce seen through drifting clouds when all the  
                   night

Is black with tempest ; and its light was dim,  
 Cold, cheerless, as in Iceland's winter falls  
 One straggling sunbeam o'er a waste of snow.  
 Her face was beautiful, but pale and sad  
 With untold grief ; her long dark careless hair  
 Had slipped its band, and strayed in tangled folds  
 Down her cold bosom ; and her eye was dim :  
 But heaved her breast as though a Hecla fire  
 Were cratered there, and forced its way unbid  
 In sudden storms of sighs ; most beautiful,  
 Most sad, she sat ; but oh if Sorrow stole

A charm awhile from Beauty, Beauty's self  
Might envy well the charm that Sorrow lent  
To every perfect feature : there awhile  
I stood in silence, loth too soon to wake  
Her reverie ; at the last she spoke, her voice  
Sank deep and mournful on my listening ear  
As moans the sad sea wind the long night through  
About the desert unfrequented shore.  
“ And who art thou,” she said, “ whose careless step  
Hath thus disturbed us in our place of rest,  
Our long last home, where ages flow untold  
In sad succession, like a funeral train  
That knows no end ; and never breaks the morn,  
But morn and eve are lost in ceaseless night.”  
Then I in wonder, “ Not with curious eye  
Led on by idle fancy have I come,  
But wandering in amazement, from among  
The lordly mansions of an early time,  
When dwelt the gods on earth, and raised them up  
Eternal houses, splendid as the crest  
Of white Olympus when his topmost snows  
Reflect the thunderer's presence, and the state  
Of heaven descends, to awe the eyes of men.”

"Poor relics these," she said, "but I have seen  
 The hundred-gated Thebæ, when in youth  
 She sat aloft in queenly state, as sits  
 The cloud-capped rock above a waste of sea.  
 A wondrous city ; and a wondrous land,  
 Such as no eye can ere again behold :  
 A land of morning, where the early sun,  
 Hailed with full-throated voice of welcome, rose  
 In cloudless splendour far beyond the hills  
 That bound thy utmost gaze : and all around  
 Th' empurpled mist pierced through with golden  
     light  
 Fled at his coming, and he reigned alone  
 Through the wide sky, sole monarch of the day.  
 A land of evening, where the full-orbed moon  
 And all the stars that gem the coronal  
 Of dewy Night, shone o'er us, with a song  
 Of voiceless music ; and the balmy air  
 Slow breathing wafted on the full perfume  
 From groves of citron by the banks of Nile :  
 And through a thousand kingly palaces  
 The calm light slumbered on the pictured walls :  
 The while the shadows of our city towers

Sloped, deepening down, across the yellow sands.  
But, for no language can avail to speak  
The early glories of the Theban town,  
The toil of works, the temples, palaces  
That rose to heaven ; and more than all the rest  
The earnest life that throbbed in every pulse,  
And prompted on to words and deeds of fame,  
That live in story in the mouths of men,  
I will recall a vision from the past,  
And shew thee wonders, more than tongue can tell.”  
I turned me at her bidding, and beheld  
A countless people, toiling on till eve,  
All with a single purpose piling up  
Huge granite rocks, and moulding into form  
With curious art the uncouth mass of stone ;  
And while they laboured, rose, as in a dream,  
Deep-bastioned walls, and turrets high to heaven,  
And spacious courts, and palaces, and shrines  
Of jewelled fretwork, deep inlaid with gold :  
And one was there who urged them on to toil,  
And sang the glories of the coming age,  
And Thebes, the queen of nations ; and I knew  
The guardian goddess of the town, and knew

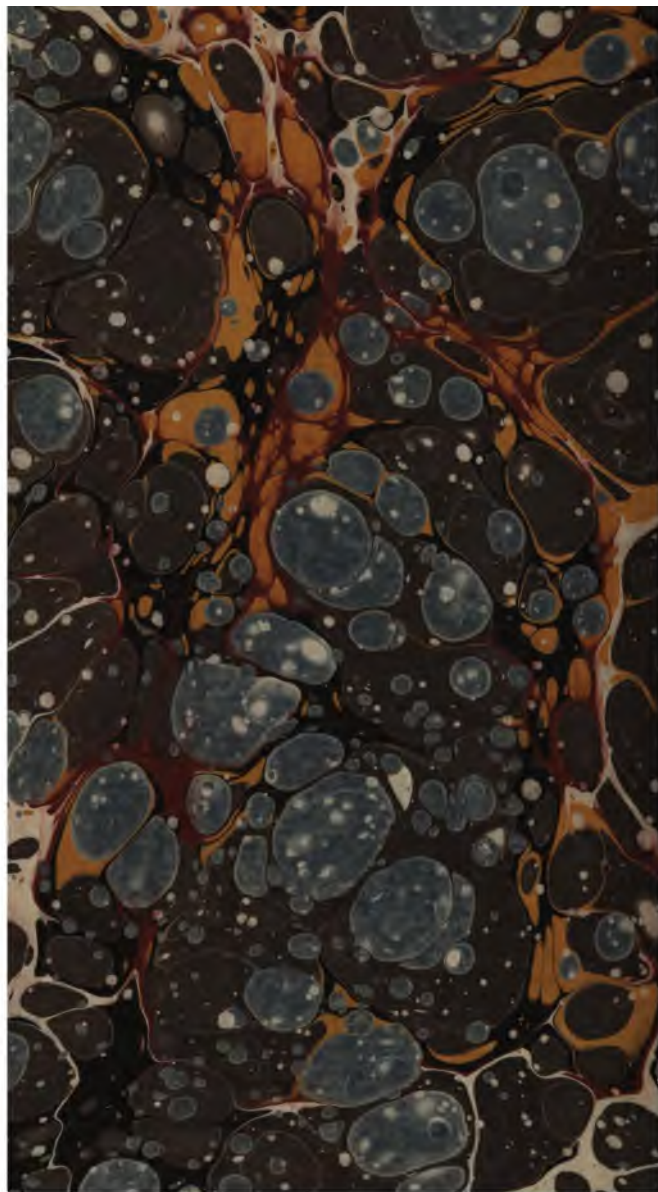
The strange sad lady whom I erst had found  
 In lonely sorrow, weeping in the tombs.  
 Once more I gazed : Tithonus' royal son  
 Rode forth : to battle with the warrior Greeks  
 That fought at Ilium ; twenty thousand knights  
 And thousand chariots thronged the changing plain.  
 'Twas early morning, and the glowing East  
 Flushed with the purple sunrise, as the car  
 Of bright Aurora shone upon the day,  
 Led by the rosy Hours : about his head  
 The bickering sunbeam floated, kindling up  
 A thousand rainbow hues, red, emerald, gold,  
 And violet. As in some deep-shaded bower  
 The twining jasmine, tangled with the rose,  
 Iris and honeysuckle, cheats the eye  
 With warm soft hues, half manifold, half one.  
 So beamed, innoxious, round his crested head,  
 The wild bright glory of the lambent flame,  
 Aurora's greeting to her warrior child.  
 But now the scene was changed ; through every  
     gate,  
 In strange dark garb, poured in the victor band  
 From Susa's palace, and the Median bank

Of far Choaspes : tall above the rest  
The monarch of the East, Cambyses, rode  
In more than kingly state, his chariot yoked  
With snow-white horses, and the gods looked down  
With jealous eyes, unseen ; but now he came  
All conqueror, none withstood his onward way.  
But while I gazed, and heard, or seemed to hear,  
The burning temples crash in thunder down ;  
And tongues of fire and clouds of pillared smoke  
Rose everywhere, as burst upon the town  
The long-pent fury of the Persian host ;  
The sun had flaunted in the eastern sky  
The first red banner of the early dawn,  
And, nearer now, had fringed the purple clouds  
With hues of morning : and my vision passed  
Affrighted from before me, and the day  
Came up victorious, scattering in his course  
The changeful shadows of reluctant night.









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